

## WHAT WE ALL SHOULD SAY

Luke 18:9-14 Text vs. 13 *“The tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner’”.*

What I’m about to tell you will set the scene for my sermon this morning. In 1971 there was a fantasy film starring Gene Wilder as Willy Wonka in *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. Its theme was greed and selfishness and told the story of a poor little boy named Charlie Bucket. Charlie lived in a small house with his parents and all four of his grandparents on the edge of an unnamed English town. Charlie wanted nothing more than to make his family happy. They were very poor and didn’t have much to eat, which accounted to Charlie’s small size; however, he had developed a yearning for chocolate because he had to walk past Mr. Wonka’s chocolate factory every day on his way to and from school. It was said, Willy Wonka made the perfect candy bar because of the brand of chocolate he used. One day, Mr. Wonka announced he had hidden five Golden Tickets in five of his Wonka chocolate bars he had shipped all over the world to find someone worthy enough to assume control of Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory when he retired. Charlie felt something when he bit into a chocolate bar. He pulled it out of his mouth, and it was the corner of a ticket. Charlie had found his Golden Ticket. And it was just in time to tour the factory the next day. He ran home, grabbed his grandpa Joe, and together they sang a little song, *“I’ve got a Golden Ticket.”* So, five children from around the world took their golden tickets to Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory and signed a contract expecting a lifetime supply of candy. But as the story goes on, some lost their contract. How? By breaking the rules. They got into trouble and had to end their tours early. Augustus Gloop was an oversized, snobbish boy. Very greedy. He was the first too be eliminated by reason of his being too impatient and too eager. The other three children were just as greedy and selfish. Each child wanted to take possession of something they believed they were entitled to, because they had a “golden ticket”. But during his factory tour, Charlie saw everything Mr. Wonka showed him with excitement and delight. He held tightly to Grandpa Joe’s hand and followed every direction Mr. Wonka gave. And when Charlie was the only child left, Mr. Wonka told Charlie he was the one who would inherit his chocolate factory when he retired. So, Charlie and his family went to live at the chocolate factory which ended his family’s poverty. They were never hungry again.

And the plot of *Charlie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* clearly divides people into two categories: those who are wealthy, and those who aren’t. Four of the children who won Golden Tickets led wealthy, privileged lives. Charlie didn’t, which suggests wealth, or the lack of it, isn’t everything in life. And that’s the point of our lesson. A lot of people think that just because they have a golden ticket to life, they’re entitled! A lot of people think that way about their religion. They think they have a contract with God that gives them certain things. This isn’t new. It’s been around a long time. That’s why Jesus told this parable about the prayers of two men. And if you listened closely to the reading of this Gospel lesson you heard the ‘golden ticket thinking’ in one man’s prayer. Listen again. <sup>11</sup>*“The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ <sup>13</sup>But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’”*

That’s quite a contrast, isn’t it? Imagine how people heard that in Jesus’ day! Both types of men were well known among the Jewish people. The Pharisee? He was a religious leader. An example of leadership among the Jews. The Tax Collector? He probably wasn’t a Jew. And as a tax collector he wouldn’t have been very popular. The Jews saw him as working for the Emperor of Rome to help oppress the Jewish people. So, those Jews who heard this parable would have assumed the hero of the story was the Pharisee. And the Tax Collector? He was the enemy! They were more comfortable with that Pharisee’s prayer and would have agreed with his claim of righteousness and spiritual superiority. But not the Tax Collector! They would have been appalled by the Tax Collector even being in the Temple. They would have thought him foolish to even offer a word of prayer to their Jehovah God. But Jesus showed them that the *Golden-Ticket* thinking of that Pharisee was wrong! It was the Tax Collector who was justified before God.

And there are plenty of people like Pharisee today! They think they have a lock on God. They’re sure they belong to the right religious group. They’re guaranteed a seat at God’s table! Those Jewish people bragged, *“I belong to the tribe of Judah”*, one of the twelve Tribes of Israel named after Judah, the son of Jacob and was the first tribe to take its place in the Promised Land. *I’m from the line of Abraham!*” God appeared to Abraham when he was 99 years old and promised Abraham, he would produce many descendants. Abraham would be the father of many nations. Kings would descend from him. Those Jews were sure they belonged to the God’s elect, because being a child of Abraham made them holy. They had their Golden-Ticket!

But the problem was, the Pharisee was too self-righteous. He saw everyone’s sin but his own. He didn’t go to the Temple to pray to God. He went to the Temple to remind God of how good he was. And how bad everyone else was. *“I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector.”* Do you pray like that Pharisee? *“I am not*

*like others.*” Or do you pray like the Tax Collector? *“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”* It wasn’t a loud prayer, like the Pharisee. It wasn’t a challenging prayer. It was just a simple prayer. You could barely hear him when he said it. But that seven-word prayer was full of humility. It was a prayer about the way life really is. *I’m not fit to stand before You, God. I’m not worthy even to be speaking to You. I have no ground to stand on.* *“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”* Yes, prayers should come from a humble heart. Not a presumptuous one. Not self-important. Not expecting. Just *“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”*

A college girl visited the home of Ludwig von Beethoven in Bonn, Germany. He was one of the world’s greatest musicians. She slipped under the rope that kept people away from Beethoven’s piano and began to play it. She said to the guard in charge, “I suppose every musician who comes here wants to play this piano.” He said, “the great Paderewski who enjoyed success after success as a pianist, statesman, and composer was visiting here, and someone asked him to play that same piano you’re playing. He replied, ‘No, I do not feel worthy to play the great master’s piano.’” Now, that’s humility! *I’m not worthy!*

The Pharisee in this parable built himself up, by tearing others down. He compared himself with the tax collector to make himself look good. He judged the tax collector to raise his own self-worth. How many times have you done the same thing? How many times have you looked at someone and said, “I’m not like that person.” Do you look at others and say, “I come to church every Sunday. I tithe. I’m on a church committee. I donate my time to the Food Pantry. Now look over there. They only come to church on Christmas and Easter. They never do anything for the church. What sinners they are!”

Well listen, if you think like that, this parable is for you! It frees you from having to judge others. Remember, it’s not all the good things you do that make you righteous before God. It’s not tithing. It’s not working on a church committee. It’s not being busy doing churchy things. No! It’s when you have no defense for your sin. And there’s no way out! It’s when you recognize you are saved by God’s grace, alone. And you’re left with nothing else than to say, *“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”*

Your faith doesn’t make you better than others. You’re a sinner, just like them! You’re just like that tax collector. You’re saved, and you’re forgiven, only by what Jesus did for you on the cross. Bow down before Him. Receive the gift He offers you. He gave you your *Golden-Ticket* to eternal life by His death on the cross. When you’re willing to trust God with openness and humility, then you will receive all He has to offer you. It’s the gift of eternal life. You don’t have to work for it. You only have to ask for it!

So, go from this place this morning in faith, determined to be among those who have received God’s gift of everlasting life. And all you had to do was humbly say, *“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”* AMEN!